



If You Can Keep It: The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty

Eric Metaxas

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#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Eric Metaxas delivers an extraordinary book that is part history and part rousing call to arms, steeped in a critical analysis of our founding fathers' original intentions for America.

In 1787, when the Constitution was drafted, a woman asked Ben Franklin what the founders had given the American people. "A republic," he shot back, "if you can keep it." More than two centuries later, Metaxas examines what that means and how we are doing on that score.

If You Can Keep It is at once a thrilling review of America's uniqueness—including our role as a "nation of nations"—and a chilling reminder that America's greatness cannot continue unless we embrace our own crucial role in living out what the founders entrusted to us. Metaxas explains that America is not a nation bounded by ethnic identity or geography, but rather by a radical and unprecedented idea, based on liberty and freedom for all. He cautions us that it's nearly past time we reconnect to that idea, or we may lose the very foundation of what made us exceptional in the first place.

If You Can Keep It: The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty Details

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Jessica says

Unfortunately, past the initial quote from Alexis de Tocqueville, this book ceased to meet my expectations.

I found Eric Metaxas to be quite partisan, devoutly religious (there is a conclusion that all Sunday school teachers have sterling character and moral judgment) and convinced of the concept of American Exceptionalism. Let's start there. He says that we should "love America" and that "the cynicism we often have about life in general and about our country was nowhere to be found in these countless immigrants." He even mentions how America is the only place of true free speech and how nobody in America is above the law. This sort of idealistic generalization made me put the book down for a moment several times as I was reading. I believe in optimism but implying that America is basically the permanent centerpiece of the world and some sort of utopian safe haven is taking it a little bit too far. Believing that one is the best provides hope, true, but it's not the best to hold that belief as the incontrovertible truth. Some would call it arrogance. Some would call it dangerous overconfidence. Anyways the title of the book itself ("The Forgotten Promise") implies that America has some work to do. I was really confused as to why Metaxas seemed to disagree with the very claim in his title throughout his book.

Metaxas relates a story of Benjamin Franklin early on where Franklin spoke to a woman and implied that America will exist as a republic only as long as the people uphold the promise of America (aka what is outlined in the Constitution). He says that this was a start of the idea that an entire society would be responsible for the stability of a nation. I think he was forgetting about all of the social contract philosophers, but he does mention them himself later in the book so who knows.

As for the religious aspect, some of the time I felt like I was reading a missionary's mission statement rather than an analysis of the Constitution. Metaxas tries to argue that the maintenance of America as a republic is not "for our own sake" but rather for other countries' sakes. He claims that we are a "nation with a mission to the rest of the world," following up with the statement that that "is a big idea, not often heard." Really? That is an idea that is more than prevalent and not just for America and not just in the modern day. Just think of the era of imperialism (which by the way, the mission statement of the US Department of State is eerily similar to).

Metaxas also goes on long tangents where he devotes time—and a substantial amount of his book—to what he is personally interested in and not necessarily what actually contributes to the subject of the book. For example, there are 35 pages on George Whitefield alone. Metaxas paints Whitefield as a unifying force, treating all, including slaves and women, equally. I think Metaxas forgot the part where Whitefield campaigned to legalize slavery for two years until it finally was (Whitefield called the "legalization of slavery as part personal victory and part divine will"). Perhaps Whitefield did think that slaves had souls as well or that they should be treated fairly, but that doesn't exactly make him the picture of equality for all. Metaxas's fixation with Whitefield seems to be more personal. After all, he does think that Americans are basically "the chosen people." Over another 8 pages, Metaxas shares his personal analysis of Longfellow's poem "Paul Revere's Ride" (Metaxas, your degree in English is showing). Honestly, those things didn't really add to the book for me. Rather, they detracted from the more relevant message.

This also might be of interest: Eric Metaxas's article in the Wall Street Journal:
<http://www.wsj.com/articles/eric-meta...>

Theoretical physicist and cosmologist Lawrence Maxwell Krauss comments:

<http://www.newyorker.com/tech/element...>

Regardless of your religion, I think that there is a truth in America that disagrees with Metaxas: one that is perhaps one of the most pressing issues today. We are not a nation of perfect religious freedom. Stereotypes and prejudice exist. Discrimination exists. We do not welcome all immigrants with open arms. We can be very suspicious, perhaps overly so. Anyways, it irks me that Metaxas presents a front of apparent religious freedom in America whilst he advocates for certain religions as the "unifying" ones.

Metaxas claims that we shouldn't "think of the ways America had failed to live up to her noble promises," but to think "instead of the promise." He quotes Ronald Reagan saying "There is no limit to the amount of good you can do if you don't care who gets the credit." No offense, but you're kidding yourself if America doesn't take credit. That would detract from the whole patriotic nationalism thing. And really, ignoring our mistakes doesn't make them go away. You can't erase history. Apologizing and taking responsibility for the ways we have failed may be a better course of action.

So, love America? Not quite. Love what America has the potential to be.

There's so much more I could say but that would take forever. Please feel free to correct me if you interpreted this book differently; I'd love to hear things from a different perspective.

Note: I received this book through the Goodreads Giveaway Program

****Edit 1/30/2018:** Ordered a book online and got the wrong one in the mail. Which book did I get by mistake? None other than Eric Metaxas's newest book "Martin Luther." Still trying to decide whether I should read it or not.

Jack Barsky says

This book should be required reading for all high school seniors. If we forget our roots that means we have none. Without roots the tree will eventually wither away. As a German, a communist and secret agent in the employ of the KGB I have a somewhat unusual perspective on this matter. In my view, many Americans do not have an understanding of what LIBERTY actually means. If we do know what we have we are unable to treasure it. If we cannot treasure and protect it, we will eventually lose it. And then we want it back. But this is the point the author is making: At that point it might be too late - be concerned Americans! A great book and an eye opener for folks who dig into the origins of American history for the first time, and a good refresher for those who are history buffs. And last but not least: It may be a surprise to many, but this country was founded by Christians and based on Christian principles. To reject Christianity is to reject o

Elsa K says

I think I love reading anything by Eric Metaxas. He is a great story teller and always makes me think. I loved hearing the stories about the beginning of our country and some amazing people like Paul Revere and George Whitefield. Why are kids not taught that stuff? I guess that is part of his purpose in writing. I think his gifting is story telling, so this book wasn't quite as griping as his biographies, but there were some really

good points made. I love how intelligent he is, yet he makes everything so easy to comprehend. I thought this was a great and timely read especially with the election so close. I don't know if I agree with everything he says, but he brings up some great ideas.

Anna LeBaron says

Eric Metaxas, "If You Can Keep It" is a bold, patriotic reminder about what our country once was, the state it currently is in, and what it can be once again, if we each do our part to love our country. He explains the Golden Triangle of Freedom, which is: freedom requires virtue, virtue requires faith, and faith requires freedom.

He reminds the reader about how the stories of the heroes of our nation inspire others to greatness and warns us about abandoning the "vital tradition of venerating heroes".

He makes a case for loving America, an idea that is increasingly backward, and even offensive to some because of certain historical realities, which he enumerates. Heroism and ignominy are both a part of the historical record. We must rejoice and be inspired by the former, and repent of of the latter.

"For a nation is a partnership between the people who have died, the people who are alive now, and the people who have not yet been born."

- Edmund Burke

"We are a great country and our song has not yet been sung."

- Daniel Hannan, speaking of Great Britain, but that can also be said about America.

I received an Advance Reader Copy in exchange for my honest review.

David Huff says

I listened to the Audible version of this fine book on a road trip to Virginia (coincidentally, a state filled with American history) and back. Metaxas makes a compelling and clear case in explaining why we as Americans should love our country. He begins with the famous title story, wherein Benjamin Franklin was asked by a Mrs. Powell whether, in drafting the Constitution, the authors had created a monarchy or a republic. His answer to her -- "a Republic .. if you can keep it!"

Then comes a very interesting and motivating tour through many important vignettes of American history -- as he dealt at length with fascinating topics that are too seldom remembered, or noted for their importance. In no particular order, the ones which especially struck me included: the stories of Nathan Hale and William Wilberforce; Franklin's amazing speech, during the writing of the Constitution, concerning prayer; the incredible, Providential story of Squanto; the story of Paul Revere and the old North church in Boston; the remarkable reach of George Whitefield's influence; Os Guinness' Triangle of Freedom (freedom requires virtue, which requires faith, which requires freedom...) and much more.

This should be a book, in my view, that is required reading -- not only in high school or college, but by everyone seeking citizenship in America. Highly recommended!

Celia says

I liked the book. I enjoyed what I learned, especially about The Golden Triangle of Freedom.

I have read reviews, however, that say that fact checking in the book is lacking; not all things said are historically accurate; that Metaxas writes so well he lulls the reader into complacency.

Well, consider me lulled.

I have no guilt about my attitude. I feel the book is much more spiritual than it is a history. I understand, though, if it is advertised as historical, it should be accurate and not misleading.

So, be forewarned. If you concentrate on this book's spiritual aspects, you will probably not be as disappointed.

Christian Hamaker says

2.5 stars. I was looking forward to a vigorous defense of American exceptionalism - an idea that has fallen out of favor, but which, as Metaxas demonstrates, was heartily endorsed historically by those who weren't U.S. citizens. And I appreciated the author's stated reliance on a paradigm, the Golden Triangle of Freedom, from Os Guinness, a writer I've always admired.

But much of the prose here struck me as pedestrian. That's not a huge failing, but I wanted the book to "sing" more than it does in extolling the ideas expressed.

Worse, I just can't shake Metaxas' Trump love, which manifested after this book was published, but which I read into his earlier writing. As a longtime GOP voter who feels homeless these days, I can't help but be baffled that those who believe in the things expressed in this book went all in for Trump's candidacy and his presidency. I wish the president well - or, I try to (it's easy to forget that he's due honor when he so often acts and speaks dishonorably) - but he's tainted a lot of right-leaning "thought leaders" who, it turns out, don't really have the same ideas in practice as I do about how American ideals should manifest themselves in our politics. This is an ongoing disappointment. I should be used to it by now, but I find myself regularly surprised at the level to which the political Right has sunk.

Kris says

An exploration of American identity and exhortation to rediscover and value the traditions of our country. I was especially intrigued by the idea of the triangle of freedom: freedom requires virtue, virtue requires faith, faith requires freedom.

I look forward to reading more Metaxas in the future!

Matthew Huff says

How appropriate to finish this book on the Fourth of July! Metaxas has a refreshingly clear writing style, and, coupled with his warm narrative voice in the audiobook, his treatise on American history, liberty, and virtue pulled me right in. I loved this book very much. It settled a great many questions I had about our founding. My dad recommended that it be required reading in American high schools, and I couldn't agree more.

Collin says

*My full review can be found here: <https://christandpopculture.com/search/>

There is much I appreciate about Eric Metaxas. He's an engaging personality with a clever wit. On many subjects, he proves insightful and winsome. He's also a gifted writer, which makes reading his books enjoyable. However, "If You Can Keep It" turned out to be a disappointing product. From the opening pages, he determines to recover the original intentions of the Founders when crafting the Constitution of our country, but he does so in a way that ends up skewing the past, whitewashing iconic figures from history, and arranging poorly researched details to form a questionable conclusion, namely, that America was called by God for the purpose of distributing ordered liberties to the world (214).

Among the historical missteps present in the book: he claims John Adams was an orthodox Christian (56) despite the Founder's rejection of staple Christian doctrines like the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and the eternality of hell (these are essential to being an "orthodox Christian"); he describes George Whitefield's preaching as a unifying force that brought all ethnicities and socio-economic classes together under the banner of the gospel (96, 111), even though Whitefield advocated for the legalization of slavery in Georgia (prior to its establishment) and owned slaves himself; he claims that religious freedom and tolerance have been singularly prized as American principles since the Massachusetts Bay Colony (70), despite the Puritans themselves having exiled members of their colony for religious dissent (see Anne Hutchison and Roger Williams). In addition to these obvious errors, he provides copious amounts of quotations, none of which are properly cited. He includes only 8 endnotes, all of them recommending further reading or offering brief peripheral discussion.

These problems cause the book to feel less like a serious historical study and more like a well-intended, but misguided attempt at inspiring patriotism. Again, I appreciate much of what Metaxas has to offer, but this book was sloppy and in many ways threatens to conflate the distribution of American liberties in the world with the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. The two are not one and the same and there is no biblical basis for making such sweeping claims about God's providential hand in establishing America for the expressed purpose of enlightening the world to the freedoms and liberties we enjoy. That was my biggest problem with the book. It veers towards co-opting the beauty of the gospel and runs the risk of reducing it to something less than what God truly desires for the world, as expressed in Scripture.

In the end, "If You Can Keep It" fails to live up to its claims. Though well-written, it is poorly informed and ignores important historical nuance in order to defend its thesis. Such errors in minor detail should cause readers to question the bigger picture of the argument as it is ultimately built on an unsustainable foundation.

Bob O'bannon says

I recall my days in elementary school when I was taught that America was a place worth loving, and that to be a good citizen of this nation, there were certain responsibilities and expectations for how one should live. But those days seem long gone. Patriotism has been replaced by cynicism, and the whole notion of "love of country" seems outdated and naïve.

Eric Metaxas does an outstanding job reminding us of the uniqueness of the American experiment -- the idea that a responsible people could actually freely govern themselves, instead of being ruled by the tribe with the most power or the next heir to the throne.

The risk, of course, of allowing a people to govern themselves is that things can go sour very quickly if the people go morally astray. As Ben Franklin said, "Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom." (55). And as Tocqueville wrote: "Liberty cannot be established without morality." (60). And as John Adams asserted: "our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people." (61).

In light of this important qualification, Metaxas makes the case (Ch. 3) that it was the gospel-preaching ministry of George Whitefield in the mid 18th century that actually prepared the American people for the unprecedented responsibility of governing themselves. Whitefield's influence on America was so great that "we really should not think of anything that has happened since without first thinking of" his place in American history (90). Under the transforming power of Whitefield's gospel, Americans became a virtuous people and were willing to live for something beyond themselves. An important question for us to ask today is whether we have strayed so far from our roots that we are now unable to properly govern ourselves, at least in the way the founders envisioned.

One critique: early in the book, it is implied that if the American flame goes out, that the world will tragically and perhaps irreversibly descend into hopelessness (14). But certainly Metaxas knows, as a Christian himself, that the light of the gospel and the kingdom of God is what provides the most hope to the world. This is a light that will never be extinguished, even if America is.

Nevertheless, this is a book that is very much needed right now. Even with this nation's many grievous mistakes and errors (which Metaxas is not slow to acknowledge), there is still much to love about America.

Zach says

Metaxas has established himself as an author who can shine a light on exemplary lives in history and help readers apply the principles of those figures to our present culture. This book redirects focus from the individual to America as a whole, wipes the tarnish from several somewhat-forgotten heroes and events in American history, and implores us to reclaim the pride of our forefathers and the mission of serving our less fortunate neighbors beyond our borders.

"If You Can Keep It" is both a reminder of our country's miraculous beginnings and a call-to-arms to strengthen our mission-oriented attitude to the rest of the world.

Travis Bow says

A pretty solid book designed to stir your patriotism and polish your tarnished hopes for the future. The book reads like a speech... a little flowery or repetitive at times, meant to inspire a sympathetic audience rather than to make a strong persuasive case. I find myself coming out of it feeling prouder of America and also a little chagrined for my cynicism.

An outline:

- 1) America was founded on an idea instead of common race, geography, or dictator, which is pretty incredible.
- 2) Liberty, virtue, and faith are codependent
- 3) A brief history of George Whitfield, and how he set the stage for America's cohesiveness before the Revolutionary war
- 4) Why we should start venerating our heroes again, with Nathan Hale and Paul Revere as case studies
- 5) Why the morality of our leaders - or our faith in their corruption - can either redeem or destroy us (with Washington's don't-overthrow-congress speech as an example).
- 6) How America's founding could have been guided by God as a way to help the world (with the 'miracles' of Squanto and the Constitution as evidence)
- 7) How loving America isn't corny, and it doesn't mean overlooking our faults, but it does mean loving what's good.

Favorite point #1: Corruption leads to cynicism which destroys democracy's efficacy:

So any perceived lack of virtue on the part of our leaders plays a decisive role in undermining the entire enterprise of self-government... in order for self-government to work, citizens must believe that the larger order to which they are giving themselves is essentially trustworthy and solid. They must believe that it's real, that the system works and that their efforts toward self-government matter. They must believe that they really are governing themselves through the leaders they have elected.

Once they think the system is corrupt, or that their leaders and representatives are corrupt, it's nearly impossible for the citizens to feel they are anymore part of an actual system of self-government. They will feel less good about paying their taxes, for fear that their money is being misused. It will also be difficult for them to want to give of themselves in military service, for fear that such service and sacrifice aren't worth the trouble. They will generally become cynical about the whole operation and will slowly pull back and make the end of self-government inevitable.

Corruption in leaders give citizens the sense that they are, in fact, not all in it together. They will get the positively fatal idea that there is indeed an "us" and a "them." At this point the unavoidably central idea that "we the people" are governing ourselves is doomed. The citizens will buy into the deeply pernicious idea that rather than ruling themselves, they are in fact being ruled by others - that all the talk of self-government and liberty is a sham. So they won't work with the government, but will see themselves as dupes of the government and will begin working against it, whether actively or passively. They may be more inclined to cheat on their taxes, or in being less involved in government service, or they may simply stop voting, because they have the idea that the whole thing is somehow rigged against them, so that their vote

doesn't matter, and that voting is for suckers. or they may themselves become actively cynical and vote, but not for the best and noblest candidate, but for the candidate who will put the most money in their pockets - for the one who will get them what they want at the expense of the larger enterprise. They will care for themselves more than for the welfare of the country, because they have ceased to take pride in the country or to see it as a real extension of themselves - as indeed "their" country.

So democracy without real patriotism moves toward the destruction of the ordered liberty bequeathed to us by the founders.

Favorite point #2: Love is neither criticism or blindness, it's calling out the best in someone:

If I have a son or a daughter or a spouse or a parent or another relative or a friend, I will eventually see things in their behavior that I perhaps perceive as troubling, even as out-and-out wrong. How do I deal with that? There are a few typical ways.

One of them is to home in on those problems by constantly pointing them out and criticizing that person so that the person feels unloved. Another is to be unable to divorce the person from their behavior - to say, in effect, *Whatever that person does is correct. If I love them I must accept them 'as they are'.* We can hate the sin and hate the sinner or we can love the sin and love the sinner. Both are wrong. There is a third way....

What if we treat someone as though he were the way we wished him to be?... To love someone is to see the best in them and to act toward them as though they were that best. To call them higher. To treat them with respect and love is to call them to be worthy of that respect and that love. And we can say that to love someone is not to avoid seeing their flaws, but to avoid so focusing on them that the person gets a feeling of hopelessness about changing them.

Nathan says

This book is a breath of fresh air in a time when the standard position of most people is to have a cynical view of America. Metaxes doesn't justify or gloss over our countries failures but instead points us to cherish the foundational beliefs that make up our form of government: liberty, virtue, religious freedom for the individual. Things that no other civilization has ever accomplished to the same extent. It is the kind of book that awakens you to realize it is an incredible blessing to be an American and to desire to live up to such a calling. Can we be worthy of the incredible gift our forefathers have handed us? I want to be.

PennsyLady (Bev) says

If You Can Keep It
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(Eric Metaxas) (2016)

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Dr James McHenry (a Maryland delegate) reports that as Benjamin Franklin emerged from Independence Hall at the close of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a certain Mrs Powell of Philadelphia asked, "Well Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?"

Mr. Franklin replied, "A republic, madam – if you can keep it."

I read and reread sections, underlined, highlighted and am determined to bring this forward for discussion with friends.

Eric Metaxas enables us to understand, more fully, what the founders intended for America.

Explaining Os Guinness' concept of "The Golden Triangle of Freedom" was both basic and profound. "Freedom requires virtue; virtue requires faith; and faith requires freedom. If any of these three legs of the triangle is removed, the whole structure ceases to exist."
An in-depth look at each of the legs follows.

Please understand that the material in this book is much more expansive and thought provoking than I'm able to express here.
This is definitely a book I recommend you read and take seriously.

A quote from Eric Metaxas

"I still hope that perhaps those of us who call ourselves Americans might come to understand these vital ideas, to remember them again and to know what it means to be an American."

"It's time to reconnect to that idea before America loses the very foundation for what made it exceptional in the first place."
(publishers note)

4.5 ★

Goodreads giveaway
